

I wasn't ever what you'd call a man of culture – discounting, I suppose, the music. Not that I was Beethoven or fuck-all, but it had its moment of relevance and I can say I was there for it. *Culture's* a bit much to ask of a handful of twat children, I suppose... Mucous Membrane was really just me 'n' the lads trying to scream as loud and long as we could manage before the free beers turned 'round on us and we puked up on the audience. We did it though, didn't we? Made something. Did something. Before the Sex Pistols stole it and flogged it on the high street; fifty quid and they'd throw in the tee shirt for free. *Talk* about fucked by the Venus of the Hard-sell.

Ah, fuck – I digress.

What I mean to say is: apart from those of the arcane variety, I wouldn't know *the arts* if they jumped up and bit me on the taint. But I'm also not so daft as to deny my beautiful young wife a single thing that pops into her head, am I? So when Epiphany said she was taking me out for the evening and I'd best dress classy, what could I say but *yes, love?*

South Bank's upmarket for a ragged prick like me, and I told Pif as much while we walked. She'd plastered herself all across me, all long legs and cheetah-print miniskirt, and when you look like she does you can pull off the American-rockabilly-trash thing even waltzing past bloody Westminster.

"Fuck off, John," she said, and teetered up on her high heels to kiss my cheek. "You've got the whole *sexy granddad* thing going on. It really works for you."

"Granddad, is it?" I grabbed her round the waist and *swung*, sweeping her feet right off the pavement. "Careful, lass, or *Granddad'll* have to put you over his knee – you see if I won't." Pif screamed and laughed and clung to me even harder, kissing me before her feet even touched back down. She tasted waxy and thick from that perfect black lipstick of hers. Usually she'd gripe at me for smudging it but right then she was my sweet little armful, grinning and crooning into my mouth, so I took my chances and kissed her right back. The two of us there, pretty as a picture, while the streetlights twinkled off the Thames like stars. A few hipsters walking out of a wine bar gave us the hairy eyeball – I think I heard one of them mutter: "...*some decency...*?" They could get fucked, though, because no-luck John Constantine was finally, finally getting it right: the gorgeous wife and the proper night on the town and even the ghosties and ghoulies packing it in to give him a bit of a break.

Take a careful look at *this* John Constantine, mates. This is what he looks like happy, before it all goes wrong again.

After performing her wifely duties (pashing my entire face off) and carefully reapplying her lippy (the important bit, I'm sure she'd say), Pif dragged me bodily to an unassuming door in the middle of a block. That hipster wine bar on the corner, a secondhand bookshop further down, and here a shabby iron bomb-shelter thing in chipped olive drab. Graffiti and posters all on the brickwork around it – the kind I maybe wouldn't give a second glance except... Yes, that was half-scrubbed Enochian above the lintel. A scrap of the fourteenth angelical key, if I knew my John Dee, with a jumble of random letters thrown in for good measure. Once I saw that first piece, more jumped out from the tangle. Some more Dee, first: two

planetary talismans in dripping orange paint. Then a few alchemical symbols. Something that was either the sigil of a minor demon or a circuitboard map (or – strewth – *both*, if someone was getting clever hardwiring ghosts into the machine). All of it overlapping and a bit crooked, as if copied from a book by an artist with more enthusiasm than skill – and far less magical talent than either.

I stopped dead in the street.

“Epiphany Greaves. What the *fuck* are you getting me into.”

She sagged into me, smiling like anything and clutching my arm. All warm and soft and big doe eyes, if a doe knew how to kill you thirty-two ways without breaking a nail.

“Paranoid old thing, you are. That’s set dressing.”

“I didn’t get to be this old faffing about with –” I waved my hand at the graffiti, lost for words. “With bloody *occult enthusiasts*, Pif. *Set dressing?* You know better’n that.”

The clever part of me – the ragged, suspicious, claws-out thing that’d carried me this far (farther than I ever in my *life* deserved) – *that* part took a quick one-two shuffle backwards on the pavement. Maybe there was a table open at the wine bar; I’d drag Pif there, pour a bottle down her, and she could still have her night out.

“*John*,” she said, rolling her eyes as she chased me down. When she caught me she linked her fingers in mine, pulling back towards the door. “Look at that, really. Could any of it even summon a takeaway?”

“...No. But scrawling it all out to begin with –”

“*Only a bloody idiot would* – I know, I know.” She was flat laughing at me, now, dragging at my arm. “But I know these guys, yeah? It’s a show. The ones who aren’t just theatre geeks are real, careful magicians. All proper safeguards observed, all the way through.”

Pif, damn her, must’ve sensed me wavering. A wife’s god-given instinct for when her husband’s about to throw in the towel. She tottered up on her tiptoes again to twine her arms around my neck. “I promise-*promise* I’ll keep you safe,” She whispered into my ear, sending little sparks shooting up and down my spine. When she kissed me again I could feel, without seeing my own face, that she’d left a clear, black impression of her lips on my cheek.

I went to wipe it off but she grabbed my wrist. “Did you know I make my own lipstick, Johnnie?”

I didn’t, but she rarely told me what she got up to in that lab of hers. Cosmetics were just as likely as poison. “It’s a special formula,” she simpered, touching the pad of her middle finger to her lower lip. “Not mine, originally, but I made some changes. It was a bastard getting Meurdrac’s warding potion to hold color... but I think I managed it.”

Oh, this wild girl.

“Anti-magic lipstick. You clever, clever little thing.” Smirking like the cat who’d got the fucking cream, she kissed me hard on the other cheek. Well, at least now I matched.

I’ll skip the next few minutes – all the slamming up against the wall and the snogging like teens and the getting yelled at by the doorman ’til Piffy gave our names and flashed our tickets and we were welcomed in like royalty. Standard night out with the missus; you know how it is. The place itself, though... Like I said, I really can’t tell from *the arts*, but I have a feeling that this show was anything but standard.

For one, the green bomb-shelter door didn’t lead to a theater. It led to a tunnel. A low, arched thing that sloped gently downwards, burrowing into stone or mud or whatever’s under central London (more London, I think, and more below that). It was swagged in black velvet that twisted and spiraled and snaked around the whole of the tunnel, giving the impression that we were walking down the gullet of some unbearably luxe monster. More Enochian nonsense was splashed here and there, glowing with some hidden blacklight in lurid oranges and yellows and greens.

The sloping corridor leveled and opened up suddenly to a vaulted chamber the size and shape of a Tube station, and the blacklights were still blaring but gone was the velvet. Instead the floor was all glowing green astroturf, with white wicker patio furniture and bilious pink flamingoes stuck here and there. The walls’d been painted, messy and dripping, like a blue sky with puffy white clouds. Floating through it all: more pseudo-magic gibberish, scrawled like graffiti.

Sitting at the little white tables and strolling through the room, chatting and laughing in groups of two and three, were the effortlessly fashionable. The ones who knew about art, about theatre. Who flocked to the newest gallery up Stockwell in the week that it was open, before its lack of permits got around and it was shuttered again. They had lurid, glowing drinks in their hands – electric blue, green, and pink – all in funny-shaped glasses with little umbrellas stuck on.

It all felt like a bit like a John Waters flick, if the man’d done a headful of acid before the cameras began to roll.

“Come on,” Pif laughed, catching my expression. “You’ll feel better once you get a drink down you.”

So it was to the bar we went first, shelling out I-don’t-want-to-think-about-it money for two glowing cocktails that tasted of tropical fruit and a punch to the face. We watched the bartender as we drank them, her spinning and throwing the shakers and the fruit and the bottles in the air like an octopus, face impassive behind glowing paint. The thing was, though: when she threw something up in the air, it didn’t seem to want to come back down. It all bobbed and floated around her head, almost but not *quite* beholden to the normal laws of flying glass and alcohol.

“Careful magic, hmm?”

Pif shrugged, grinning around her straw. “Careful enough not to drop anything.”

Well – she wasn't wrong, was the thing.

Arm in arm, drinks in our hands, we strolled through the bizarre little garden. I don't know if it was the booze or the music or Piffy's fingers in my back pocket, but I was starting to lighten up about the whole thing. It'd been a while since I'd seen magic as anything but a chore or a danger – unless it was being a world-ending cataclysm, which was its own bloody problem. These people, Pif's sort-of friends... they were enjoying themselves. Doing mostly good, old-fashioned theater – there was a bloody Punch and Judy show going on in one corner of the room, with full adults sitting on the floor to watch it like teenies – just throwing in a bit of sparkle here and there to make the punters *ooh* and *aaah*.

Like the bartender and her floating bottles. Or the way Punch turned the policeman into a squealing little balloon and sent him flying off towards the ceiling. Kids stuff, mostly, barring the half-assed sigils on the walls – but that was the *point*, wasn't it? Just to have a bit of fun.

This time when Pif turned to me and smiled, her teeth lit up purpley-white.

“It's something, isn't it?”

“It's... something. I just wish I knew *what*.”

She rolled her eyes and gave me a coconut-flavored kiss.

Other patrons were peeling off through tunnels and archways – labeled things like *Cabinet of Curiosities* and *See! Alice's Wonders!* in huge curling letters. Some had flashing lights. One door was blowing smoke – those low, white tendrils that make you think of a graveyard in a campy horror film. Like hands'll be shooting out of it in any minute, to grab you by the ankles and trip you up running for safety.

(Look, I'm your man for graveyards. Do some of my best work there. But the thought of hands grasping at me, of something long-dead come back for a second knock... I steered Pif away from *that* door with a genteel touch to the small of her lovely back.)

We chose, finally (or Pif chose, smiling and laughing and dragging me along), a door hidden in a false bit of wall. A painting of a blonde git in turquoise swung out, leading to another one of those arched and sloping tunnels. This one was dark-blue and starry with witch-light. Standing at its open mouth was like teetering on the edge of a tiny slice of sky.

“What do you think?” Piffy asked.

“One's as good as another, isn't it?” I drained my drink, and hers for good measure. Then, setting aside our glasses, I took her hand and walked with her into the swirling darkness. The painting swung shut behind us.

The room we stepped into wasn't silent – we could still hear the music from the main room buzzing low through the wall, and there was a bit of chatter up ahead. The air was pressed close around us. Quieter and more intimate by far than the space we'd come from. It felt like we were doing something a bit naughty, Pif and I, just by walking hand in hand. I didn't have

time to really get my butcher's in, though – only an impression of more silvery light and stars before a voice was shattering the silence.

“John Constantine!”

A woman in a red, sequined dress with a slit up to her thigh was turning away from a group of punters and gliding towards us. If she hadn't called my name I'd've been sure she'd gotten me wrong – fuck, even *with* the name I wasn't sure I knew her. One of the little perks of the lifestyle: a lot of strangers seemed to know *me*, and a lot of them were bloody furious at me for reasons I only sometimes knew.

Then she turned her head just so and the dim witch-light of the crypt hit the ridges of her cheekbones, the planes of her face. I did recognize that face, after all. *Christ*, though! I never thought I'd see it alive again. The last time we'd been face-to-face, as it were, it'd been a ghoulish thing. Dead-eyed and slack, beard grown in patchy, half mad on skag and poorly worked magic. That ghost, that memory, flashed and flickered over the woman in front of me now: her all smooth- and rosy-cheeked, smiling hugely. Lips painted red in a cupid's bow; not whispering – not repeating, over and over and over and over again – snatches of spell-work, of warding.

She saw me recognize her just as she threw her arms around me. Her smile was thick in her voice when she said: “I didn't know you were still alive, you awful bastard.”

“Fuck me *running*, you neither!” I held her at arm's length, then; took a proper eyeful of her, all clean and beautiful and *living*. “*Look* at you –” I stopped, realizing I didn't know. “But it's not Salvador anymore, is it?”

She smiled, a bit wry, patting my hand on her forearm. “John, sweetheart, If I never hear that name again it'll be too soon. It's Magdalena when I'm offstage.”

“And on?”

“You'll find out, won't you?” She winked.

“So you're what, an actor now?”

“God, no. Not really. This –” with one sweep of her hand, Magdalena gestured to her slinky red dress, to the feathers tucked in her hair, to the glittery powder pressed onto her eyelids. “It's all to throw some glamour on the real show. It's the magic I'm here for, didn't you know?”

I didn't mean it, but my eyebrows flew up my forehead. *Ah, fuck, John. Right tactful.* It's just that I remembered what she was like when we'd last seen each other, after Small Heath. What we were *both* like, honestly – though I hardly remembered anything else after the summoning. Magdalena must've read my mind on my face, because her own eyebrows scrunched up and she did a little dismissive wave of the hand.

“T'were touch and go after the Small Heath working. Barely in my right mind a handful of days out of the two years following.” She let her shoulders droop, and for a moment I saw a

flicker of the sad, empty creature who I'd left on the floor of a flat in Birmingham. "Thought I'd gotten out lucky, that I shouldn't ever touch magic again. Didn't, for years and years. But it was... joyless, I reckon. Like I was missing a part of myself. Then when I started to transition, and I was finding so much of myself..." she shrugged. "You know."

I did, was the thing. Not about not being a bloke – I've been a wolf-man and a plant-man and a ball of screaming energy bopping around on the phone line and else besides, enough to get the sense that whatever's misaligned in my head isn't the *man* part of it. But the *missing* part; the way it feels to go without magic for too long. Worse than cigarettes, worse than booze. Worse than bloody crack, I expect. *Fuck*. There's a reason I keep coming back to it.

"Yeah," I said, squeezing her arm, wishing I could say it better.

"Anyway," she said, and it was like dropping a curtain on the whole sordid affair. She smiled, her face lighting back up. Then, finally, she turned and took in Pif, who was looking gorgeous and casual while she decided how angry she ought to be. "Who's this lovely thing? Robbing the cradle as well as the grave, aren't we, Johnnie?"

I wrapped an arm around Pif's shoulders, felt her snuggle in close.

"Piffy, Magdalena Ojeda. Hell of a magician. Magdalena: my brilliant wife, Epiphany."

"Wife, hmm?" Even soft and pleased, Magdalena's smile was like a fox's. All white teeth and dark, glittering eyes. "I'm not the only one who's changed, then, am I?"

"All for the better, dove."

She and Pif grasped each other's elbows – did that one-two cheek kissing thing that always was a bit too passive aggressive and far too French for me to follow. They seemed right with each other once they pulled away, though. I suppose they'd been able to sniff around, sorting one another into *friend* or *ally* instead of *dangerous*, *may need to incinerate later*.

"Always good to meet a friend of John's," Piffy said. "The live ones, that is."

One perfect, curved eyebrow shot up Magdalena's face. She looked between us, saw neither fear nor surprise.

"You practice too, then?"

"Alchemy and potions," Pif demurred. "But I book-club with a handful of the actors."

Just then, the witch-lights burning near the vaulted ceiling flickered once, twice, three times.

"Speaking of!" Magdalena said brightly. "It's time for the main event. I'll see you both in there, shall I?"

She waved us towards another door swagged in gold and velvet. Through it we could hear chatting and scraping, footsteps and laughter. The noise of a crowd gathering, finding their seats. When I turned back to wish my friend luck she'd disappeared entirely.

*Show-off.*

“Old flame?” Pif asked lightly, leading me towards the crowd.

“Call her a colleague.”

Piffy smirked. “I know how you do your work, John. Don’t you forget it.”

I snaked my arm around her waist and pulled her tight to me. “No sex magic with anyone but you these days, my darling.”

“Yeah, *these* days.”